

# עיון וחקר הרצאות ומסות

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19

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19

Representation of the Holocaust in Soviet  
Literature and Film

Marat Grinberg • Leona Toker • Anja Tippner  
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REPRESENTATION OF THE HOLOCAUST  
IN SOVIET LITERATURE AND FILM



**Yad Vashem — The International Institute for Holocaust Research**  
**Center for Research on the History of Soviet Jews during the Holocaust**  
**Jerusalem 2013**



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REPRESENTATION OF THE HOLOCAUST  
IN SOVIET LITERATURE AND FILM

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**A**NJA TIPPNER teaches Russian, Polish, and Czech literature in the Slavic Department at Hamburg University in Germany. Her research interests include Holocaust and Jewish literature in Eastern Europe and literary representations of experiences of catastrophe and trauma. She has published works on concepts of documentation, life-writing, and auto-fictions both as general concepts and within the field of Holocaust literature (“‘Existenzbeweise’: Trauma und Erinnerung nach dem Holocaust bei Wilhelm Dichter, Henryk Grynberg und Hanna Krall,” *Osteuropa*, 1 [2004], pp. 57–74; “Vzpomínka, svědectví a šoa. Henryk Grynberg a kritika,” in Jiří Holý, ed., *Holokaust — Šoa — Zagłada v české, slovenské a polské literatuře* [Praha: University Karlova, 2007], pp. 55–69).

Her work addresses the question of what facts about the Holocaust can be introduced into a narrative in specific political, historical, and artistic constellations; that is, what can be termed as “sayable” in certain contested spaces, as well as in narratives that are used to relate catastrophic experiences (*Extreme Erfahrungen. Grenzen des Erlebens und der Darstellung*, co-edited with Ch. F. Laferl [Berlin: Kadmos, 2014]; “Die Blockade durchbrechen: Hunger, Trauma und Erinnerung bei Lidija Ginzburg,” *Osteuropa*, 61:8–9 [2011], pp. 281–296). Together with Przemysław Czapliński, Alina Molisak, and Anna Artwińska, she is currently co-editing a series of articles on the concept of catastrophe within Holocaust literature for *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne*, scheduled for publication in 2015. With regard to the “sayable,” she has also published an article on the Nazi perpetrator Jürgen Stroop, who was responsible for the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto (“Moczarskis Gespräche mit dem Henker. Zur Verschränkung von Opfer- und Täterdiskursen,” in Silke Segler-Meißner and Claudia Nickel, eds., *Von Tätern und Opfern. Zur medialen Darstellung von politisch und ethnisch motivierter Gewalt im 20/21 Jahrhundert* [Frankfurt am Main u.a.: Peter Lang, 2013], pp. 41–61).



# The Writings of a Soviet Anne Frank?

## Masha Rol'nikaite's Holocaust Memoir *I Have to Tell* and Its Place in Soviet Literature<sup>1</sup>

Anja Tippner

### Introduction

"Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude," writes Dori Laub, who has researched the phenomenon of trauma extensively.<sup>2</sup> Testimonies come to life and evolve in a dialogue with another person, and they require what Laub calls a "primary emphatic bond," the source of a "basic human recognition."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, what can be talked about and what cannot be talked about depends to a great extent on the time and place that the dialogue between witness and listener takes place. Traumatic experiences are not always allowed to become an issue of larger public debate, and sometimes societies appear to be completely unresponsive to certain testimonies.

As is well known, this was the case when it came to speaking about the Holocaust and its traumatic after-effects in the Soviet

1 I want to thank Marina Balina for commenting on this paper, and Arkadi Zeltser for sharing his thoughts on the process of writing and re-writing with regard to Grossman's and Ehrenburg's *Black Book* and Soviet testimonials in general.

2 Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or Vicissitudes of Listening," in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 70–71.

3 Dori Laub and Daniel Podell, "Art and Trauma," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 76/1995, pp. 991–1005, *passim*.



Union. For the longest time after the war, the Holocaust was not mentioned or memorialized in public discourse.<sup>4</sup> The Soviet unresponsiveness was the result of three factors. First, the Soviet master narrative of wartime experiences was one of heroism, resistance, and eventually victory.<sup>5</sup> Victims of any kind — be they Holocaust survivors, prisoners of war, or simply people stranded in the territories occupied and terrorized by Nazi Germany — could not be part of this story. Second, the dominance of fictional narratives within the field of war literature belied factual accounts. And, third, the violent antisemitism of the postwar years did not permit sympathetic portrayals of the Jewish experience.

Thus, both private and individual experiences of loss, trauma, and suffering were relegated to the sphere of the collective unconscious, especially if they related to the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> Soviet culture focused its attention on the mutilated body but denied the fact that there was such a thing as mental wounds and haunting memories. Testimonies about trauma and survival in the camps and ghettos coexisted uneasily with the official narrative of the war, which took shape immediately after the war in numerous films, books, memorials, and official histories. These told the story of a great, if difficult and costly, victory. After 1945, this image of the war was turned into one of the founding myths of the Soviet Union and shaped Soviet self-perception to a great extent, as Amir Weiner and Nina Tumarkin have shown.<sup>7</sup> As a

4 This was a shared trait among many Socialist postwar countries; see Thomas C. Fox, "The Holocaust under Communism," in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 420–439.

5 These accounts and stories of wartime heroism were often purely imaginary, as the sociologist Maria Ferretti has pointed out. Maria Ferretti, "Unversöhnliche Erinnerung. Krieg, Stalinismus und die Schatten des Patriotismus," *Osteuropa*, 55:4–6 (2005), p. 48. See also Lev Gudkov, "Die Fesseln des Sieges. Russlands Identität aus der Erinnerung an den Krieg," *Osteuropa*, 55:4–6 (2005), p. 67.

6 Gudkov, "Die Fesseln des Sieges. Russlands Identität aus der Erinnerung an den Krieg," p. 67.

7 Remembrance of World War II and the memorial traditions that have developed over the last seventy years have proved to be central to Russian national identity to this day. Cf. Nina Tumarkina, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War. The Second World War and the Fate of*



result, remembering and documenting wartime experiences — especially if they involved defeat or captivity and did not contain a heroic deed (*podvig*) — was not an easy task in the Soviet Union, since every account had to follow the ideological master narrative.

If one takes a closer look at the Soviet literature that was published on the Holocaust and compares these texts to Polish or Czech literature, striking differences become apparent. In the Soviet Union fictional and poetic texts prevailed, and the documentary mode was not popular. Most of the prominent texts, such as Anatoly Rybakov's *Heavy Sand* (*Tiazhelyi pesok*) or Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (*Zhizn' i sud'ba*), fictionalize the historical events and present them in a highly stylized manner. Documentary texts and testimonies are scarce.<sup>8</sup> The taboo on fiction that was so strong in Western Europe seems not to have existed in Soviet literature. This can be easily explained. First, fictional narratives could be adapted more easily to the demands of Soviet discourse, whereas testimonies by witnesses were difficult to “translate” into “Soviet Speak”; and second, they complied better with the aesthetic demands of Socialist Realism.

Even if the discrepancy between the actual war experience and the war rhetoric was obvious, and many who had participated

*the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). For a critical discussion of the influence of the “cult” of World War II on Russian society today, which has been analysed by Tumarkin, see Dina Khapaeva, *Goticheskoe obshchestvo: morfologiya koshmara* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008), pp. 83–88.

- 8 A notable exception to this trend is the heavily censored novel on the mass killings at Babi Yar in Kiev by Anatoly Kuznetsov. He used the eyewitness account of a female survivor of the killings and wove it into the fabric of his own auto-fictional account of Kiev during World War II; Anatoly Kuznetsov, *Babii Yar. Roman-dokument* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1967). Tellingly, there is no printed source given for the witness account he draws from in his text. The 1970 edition, which was published after Kuznetsov's defection to Britain by the German émigré publishing house Posev, contains the censored passages as well as Kuznetsov's afterthoughts and sentences he did not dare to write while still hoping to publish the book in the Soviet Union; see Anatoly Kuznetsov, *Babii Yar. Roman-dokument* (Frankfurt a.M.: Posev, 1970).



in the war protested against the romanticized and fictionalized image that gradually took shape in the Soviet media, it proved to be persistent. The voices of the survivors and the expression of suffering never became an integral part of Soviet literature and certainly did not shape the understanding of World War II.<sup>9</sup> Even if some testimonies saw the light of publication, their status remained precarious and ambivalent.

One of the few examples of testimonial literature published in the Soviet Union was Masha Rol'nikaite's memoir *I Have to Tell* (*Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*).<sup>10</sup> In this article I explore how Rol'nikaite's memoir was adapted to the Soviet discourse and how she reflects on this in her post-Soviet memoir *That Happened Later* (*Eto bylo potom*),<sup>11</sup> which she wrote in the 1990s, based on her memories of Soviet times. Tracing the transformations of her account in the face of Soviet ideological demands, this paper will highlight some of these changes. In conclusion, the case of Rol'nikaite will be viewed from the perspective of witness literature on the Holocaust and its place in Russian literature today.

## The Diary of a Holocaust Survivor and Its History

Masha Rol'nikaite's memoir is a hybrid. It is composed in parts of the diary she kept in the Vilna ghetto as well as in several other camps together with a more summarized description of her experiences in different camps, which she wrote down shortly after the war and combined with the text of the diary.

9 David Shneer writes: "Placing survivors' narratives at the center of Holocaust scholarship is something new in Soviet-Jewish scholarship, which, before the fall of the Soviet Union, had only limited political space to tell this personal and very Jewish story." See David Shneer, "Probing the Limits of Documentation," in *Kritika*, 10:1 (2009), p. 124.

10 Masha Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1965).

11 *That Happened Later* is paired with her Holocaust memoir in a new edition: Masha Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda* (Sankt-Petersburg: Zolotoi vek, 2002). The text of the Holocaust memoir in this edition is a reprint with minimal, mostly stylistic, changes and corrections of errors found in the 1960s' edition. In the following I cite from the 1965 edition for the Holocaust memoir and from the 2002 edition for the later memoir text.



When the German troops invaded Lithuania, Rol'nikaite was thirteen years old; she was almost eighteen when she was liberated by Red Army soldiers. She had survived not only the Vilna ghetto but several concentration camps in Poland and western Prussia. Rol'nikaite had always kept a diary, and she continued to do so against all odds. In the course of the war, her diary writing changes from being a schoolgirl hobby to a moral obligation; from writing in a pretty notebook to writing on scraps of paper salvaged from the garbage. After the war she had to come to terms not only with the fact that her mother and two of her siblings had been killed but also with the fact that no one wanted to hear her story. Rol'nikaite made several attempts to publish her testimony, but failed time and again.

The book was finally published almost twenty years after the war, at the beginning of the 1960s, in the original Yiddish, and then shortly after, in Lithuanian and Russian translations, which she undertook as well. In her memoir *That Happened Later*, she describes the difficulties she encountered in her effort to publish the book, from the earliest attempts during the times of the antisemitic campaigns that prevailed during the late Stalinist period to being turned down again and again when she sent the manuscript in its original Yiddish version to the journal *Sovetish Heymland*. During the years that it took to publish the book, she re-wrote the text several times, even accommodating it to the prevalent ideological and editorial demands, often giving up on the possibility of the text ever being published.<sup>12</sup>

Even after these revisions — or perhaps due to them — there is

12 The re-writing of her experiences is not limited to the memoir itself. Rol'nikaite recounted her testimony in different genres — children's literature, essay, young adult novel — striving to reach as large an audience as possible. See, for example, her children's books *Tri vstrechi* (*Three Meetings*) (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1970), *Privykni k svetu* (*Get Used to the Light*) (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1974), and *Dolgoe molchanie* (*Long Silence*) (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1981), all of which deal with the traumatizing effect of World War II and the Holocaust on children. She has also given a two-hour interview in Yiddish in which she recounts her story for the USC Shoah Foundation (Interview Code 625).



a marked difference in style between those parts of the book that rely on her actual diary and those parts in which she reconstructed the events from memory. The writing that deals with life in the Vilna ghetto is more detailed, richer in facts and names and dates, whereas the account of life in the camps is somewhat repetitive, even dulled: "It seems that there was nothing else in the world: only the camp, work, hunger, and cold."<sup>13</sup> Here she sums up the numbness she felt, her despair and the absence of hope in the camps. In some ways one could argue that the different writing styles reflect the differences between life in the ghetto and life in the camps. The overall impression is nevertheless one of the heightened authenticity often accorded to child witnesses.

The publication of the book turned Rol'nikaite into the Soviet "Anne Frank."<sup>14</sup> Russian readers perceived the book as a Soviet version of the diary of Anne Frank, which had been published three years earlier in Russian with a preface by Ilya Ehrenburg. Up to this point the Soviet public had not had access to witness accounts of the Holocaust. In order to familiarize Soviet readers with the Dutch Holocaust witness and with the concept of witness literature in general, Ehrenburg had written:

One voice — not that of a wise person or that of a poet, but that of an ordinary girl — speaks for the six million... The

13 Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*, p. 138.

14 See Shneer, "Probing the Limits of Documentation," p. 124. See also "Lithuanian Anne Frank," [http://www.ajr.org.uk/journalpdf/1964\\_may.pdf](http://www.ajr.org.uk/journalpdf/1964_may.pdf). It is interesting to note that the title of the "Russian Anne Frank" has been transferred to other girl diarists since then. Most of the girls who bear this moniker deal in their diaries with totalitarian experiences but not the Holocaust. See Donald Rayfield, "A Russian Anne Frank. I Want to Live: The Diary of a Young Girl in Stalin's Russia by Nina Lugovskaya," [http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/rayfield\\_07\\_06.html](http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/rayfield_07_06.html); also on Lugovskaia's diary, see <http://nnm.ru/blogs/kryaker41/sovetskaya-anna-frank/page1/>. Andrew Osborne, "'Russian Anne Frank' diary published," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/8750541/Russian-Anne-Frank-diary-published.html>, deals with a young girl's diary about the Leningrad blockade. These few examples testify not only to Anne Frank's status as a symbol but to a certain blurring of lines between different types of victims in Socialist and post-Socialist countries.



diary of the girl became both a human document of great significance and an indictment.<sup>15</sup>

In Ehrenburg's mind testimonies of victims did not only serve the ethical duty of commemoration but also a legal obligation of helping to bring perpetrators to trial. The idea of collecting incriminating material on German war crimes and documenting all stages of the Holocaust had already informed Ehrenburg's work on *The Black Book* (*Chernaia kniga*). During the war it had been his objective to get Jewish witnesses to document German atrocities in order to serve as evidence in later trials. Rol'nikaite, too, saw her diary as supporting evidence in addition to being a personal document, and in some ways it resembles excerpts from other diaries that Ehrenburg and Grossman had incorporated in *The Black Book*. Ehrenburg recommended Rol'nikaite's book to the journal *Zvezda* by saying that besides being similar to Anne Frank, this was a *Soviet* text that could be used in order to educate Soviet youth about Fascism.<sup>16</sup>

The preface to the Russian edition by the Lithuanian author Eduardas Mieželaitis also mentions Anne Frank but points out the differences between the two diaries. He states that the Soviet diary is of more importance, because this "*detskaia ispoved'*," this "child's confession," describes incarceration and the camps but also the liberation by Red Army soldiers, and thus ends on a positive note.<sup>17</sup> Both prefaces emphasize the factuality of Rol'nikaite's diary and see its cultural value in what they call "absence of imagination."<sup>18</sup>

15 Foreword by Ilya Ehrenburg to *Dnevnik Anny Frank* (Moscow: Inostrannaia literatura, 1960), pp. 9–10. An English version can be found in Ilya Ehrenburg, "About Anne Frank: Introducing Her Diary to Russians and the Unfinished Business of Nazism," in *Jewish Currents*, 15:1 (1961), pp. 18–21.

16 He writes that the diary is a "valuable antifascist document that is useful for educating young people"; Boris Frezinskii, "Il'ia Erenburg i dnevnik Mashi Rol'nikaite," 2009, [http://www.narodkiigi.ru/journals/82/ilya\\_erenburg\\_i\\_dnevnik\\_mashi\\_rolnikayte/#\\_ftn5](http://www.narodkiigi.ru/journals/82/ilya_erenburg_i_dnevnik_mashi_rolnikayte/#_ftn5).

17 Èduardas Mezhelaitis, "My tebia ne dadim v obidu..." ("We will not allow you to be insulted"), forward to Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*, p. 7.

18 This citation from Ehrenburg is from the French edition of Rol'nikaite's memoir



## Rol'nikaite's Text Within the Framework of Witness Literature

In comparison with other child survivors' testimonies, Rol'nikaite does not dwell on trauma, identity crises — let alone Jewish identity — or survivor's guilt; these are topics that do not figure in her text. But she does share topics — namely, the need for witnessing — with testimonies by Ruth Klüger or Inge Deutschkron. As in these memoirs of adolescence under Fascism, in ghettos and camps, the feeling that “her life was shaped by circumstances beyond her control” and that taking notes and remembering facts is a way of regaining control is prevalent.<sup>19</sup> She wants to testify to the German atrocities and report on what was happening in the Vilna ghetto. Like many survivors she is driven by the need to bear witness. She makes this explicit in one of the first entries in the diary. Recalling her bewilderment and disbelief after having suffered the first atrocities by the German occupiers, she writes:

And now, in all probability, people of other cities and countries where there is no war or fascism also do not comprehend, cannot grasp the true meaning of these words. For this reason it is necessary to write down in a diary everything that is happening. If I survive, I will tell this myself; if not, others will read it. But they must know!<sup>20</sup>

The urge to bear witness that Rol'nikaite describes here can be regarded as typical for witness literature. However, further on she fuses these intentions with a Soviet idea of collectiveness and presents her text as a collective effort. She describes how she handed over her diaries to a former teacher who lived outside the

and is cited here after Frezinskii's text on Ehrenburg and Rol'nikaite: [http://www.narodknigi.ru/journals/82/ilya\\_erenburg\\_i\\_dnevnik\\_mashi\\_rolnikayte/](http://www.narodknigi.ru/journals/82/ilya_erenburg_i_dnevnik_mashi_rolnikayte/)

19 Deborah Vietor-Engländer, “Identity and Education: Five Children's Formative Years in Third Reich Camps,” in Victoria Hertling, ed., *Mit den Augen eines Kindes. Children in the Holocaust — Children in Exile — Children under Fascism* (Amsterdam–Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), p. 106.

20 Rol'nikaite, *la dolzhna rasskazat'*, p. 23.



ghetto in order to keep them safe, and how, later on, when this was no longer possible, she memorized events and facts with the help of others in order to write them down after the liberation. The moral obligation to testify that she feels is heightened by the fact that it was her dead mother who told her to take notes and memorize things: "She advises me to memorize the most important things because, perhaps, the writing will have to be destroyed."<sup>21</sup>

Other prisoners provided her with writing materials — pencil stubs, scraps of paper torn from bags of cement or books. Still, parts of her notes were lost. However, within weeks after the liberation, she started to re-create these notes and document the last days of her incarceration — again talking things through with a survivor friend in order to fulfill her self-made obligation to tell the world about the camps. Rol'nikaite continues to highlight how the text should be seen as a collaboration, including the ways in which other people worked in order to get the text published — by making typewritten copies, by recommending it, like Ehrenburg did, or giving her feedback, like Solomon Mikhoels. But besides these benevolent readers and mentoring figures, there are also those who were critical, who tried to change the text, like censors and editors.

She experiences the fact that she is not able to publish her testimony, that no one wants to hear what she has to tell for almost two decades, as defeat and the betrayal of those who did not live to tell. In her memoir *That Happened Later*, she traces her renewed efforts to publish the text back to a chance encounter in the Vilna Museum of Revolution. She worked in the archives there, to which the remnants of the ghetto library had been transferred. While organizing the material she was given a map with photographs. At first glance she thought that they had belonged to one family, only to discover that the pictures were

21 Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*, p. 78; about this see also p. 129. Rol'nikaite comes back to this fact in her later memoir of 2002; Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, p. 247: "And for all these years I determinedly wrote everything down, learned it by heart, and repeated it."



all mixed up, showing unknown children, grown-ups, festivities, special occasions, and everyday scenes.

I began to look at them carefully....More photos. Family ones. Ones of individuals. More family ones. Serious, faces with expression of concentration. Eyes.... And suddenly... Suddenly it seemed to me that it was not I who was examining them but they, all these people, were looking at me. As if they were asking for something. They were asking not to be forgotten. I did not forget! I recall everything.... And I very much want everyone to know about them. It was for that reason, only for that, that I then wrote everything down.... So why am I silent?<sup>22</sup>

The effect of this description is quite overwhelming. Once again Rol'nikaite expresses her wish to bear testimony not for herself but for those who perished. And as she writes in her second memoir text, she wants to fight for the names of those that official Soviet memory condemned to oblivion, like the Jewish resistance fighter Josef Glazman. She mentions him in her manuscript, but the reviewer and the editor want her to eliminate any reference to him in the text: the editor violently crossed out his name, as if he wants to bury him under the ink.<sup>23</sup> Again and again she tries to stay true to the facts and the memory of others, even if that puts her at risk. It is the moral duty of the survivor to do so, and, as she so vividly describes, she feels almost haunted by it. When she begins to translate her manuscript from Yiddish to Russian, she feels transported back in time and place:

As soon as I started it, from the very first lines I was there, at that time. Once again I lived each day described. When I could not do so any longer, like the first time when I quite often dreamed of the camp, with an effort I returned myself to reality.<sup>24</sup>

22 Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, pp. 493–494.

23 Ibid., p. 543.

24 Ibid., p. 513.



These scenes are, in fact, vivid descriptions of the dynamics of trauma, even though Rol'nikaite does not make use of the word. The instant engulfment in memories that transport her back into the past is a textbook description of post-traumatic stress. The mixed personal feelings and ideological demands, the conscious and unconscious knowledge that govern her intentions result in a text that consists of several layers. Some are a result of her need for "self-justification" and "apology";<sup>25</sup> others stem from ideological impetuses, combining "original" diary entries with later accounts and even later assessments. In her diary Rol'nikaite tries to abstain as much as possible from what Bernstein has called "foreshadowing"; that is, interpretation of events as "the harbinger of an already determined future."<sup>26</sup> She struggles with the fact that the editor wants her to include facts in her text that she could not have possibly known at the time: "But how could I add to the text what I learned only after the war?..."<sup>27</sup>

In her post-Soviet memoir *That Happened Later*, Rol'nikaite goes to great lengths to describe the ways in which she changed her text in order to abide by the demands of reviewers and editors yet to avoid those that she deemed "artificial" (*iskusstvenno*).<sup>28</sup> In the end this resulted in a version that is made up of conflicting images of the Holocaust and the war. There are images that reflect the pain, confusion, and trauma of a child unable to understand what is going on, images that mirror her adult conception of the

25 Lawrence Kutler, "Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs," in Saul Friedman, ed., *Holocaust Literature: A Handbook of Critical, Historical, and Literary Writing* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 522.

26 Nevertheless, she puts much stress on the process of illusion and disillusion that led to false assessments: "Initially everyone believes that the arrestees were taken from jail to Ponary, to a work camp. But now we know: there was no camp at Ponary!" She makes a point to show to what length the Germans went to deceive their victims, spelling out the word "*obman*" ("deception"), and includes herself among those who believe over and over again what they are told, holding on to their hope for the better. Cf. Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*, pp. 53, 71, 86. See Michael André Bernstein, "Against Foreshadowing," in Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, ed., *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 347.

27 Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, pp. 535–536.

28 Ibid., p. 536.



events, and still others that highlight heroism and optimism and juxtapose her experiences with Soviet values. Although this runs contrary to traditional conceptions of diaries as chronicles of events without an inherent teleology, the majority of published diaries are the result of later revisions.

To refer to Anne Frank once again, her diary, too, saw revisions, both by herself as well as by the editors, and in no way can be seen as a monolithic, “authentic” rendering of the events in her hiding place in Amsterdam.<sup>29</sup> The result is in both cases — to rephrase a statement by Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder — a text that offers the reader the possibility of dealing with a traumatic history in a form that is not intimidating, overwhelming, or overly Jewish.<sup>30</sup>

### **Rol'nikaite's Text Within the Framework of Soviet War Discourse**

In many ways it is impossible to dissect the layers of the text, but Rol'nikaite's meta-textual commentaries in her second memoir shed some light on this complicated and emotionally fraught process. Soviet Holocaust memoirs have to be read within the framework of the Soviet master narrative on World War II. This was a narrative that lacked in individuality and underscored the stereotype of the heroic Soviet male.<sup>31</sup> This and other stereotypes that had been established in the era of Socialist Realism counteracted the witnesses' insistence on singularity and individuality.<sup>32</sup> The discrepancy between the Soviet master narrative and Rol'nikaite's own wartime memories becomes

29 José Van Dijck, “Composing the Self” (<http://three.fibreculturejournal.org>).

30 Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznajder, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007), pp. 78–79.

31 Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat. A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) points out that the female perspective on the war was, with a few exceptions, suppressed as well.

32 Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust. Collected Essays* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 77. For Lawrence Langer this is a shared trait of any literary or historical account of the Holocaust. He writes: “Literature generalizes human experience, while the events of atrocity we call the Holocaust insist on their singularity.”



evident in the criticism that was voiced by the person who reviewed her manuscript for the publishing house, especially regarding the “errors” in the text that he wanted to be corrected before publication. His commentary features a mix of stylistic adaptations to Soviet discourse as well as thematic corrections to accommodate notions of heroism, resistance, and enthusiasm for the war. Rol’nikaite adapted her text in some respects but stuck to her original versions in others, as will be shown.

The first entries in Rol’nikaite’s diary already show a marked difference from conventional depictions:

Sunday. Early morning. The sun shines brightly.... I am standing at the gates of our new house. I am standing guard....

War... How does one live during wartime? Can you go to school? There are enemy airplanes. I am terrified: I am afraid of the bombs.<sup>33</sup>

Although she describes the stereotypical fine summer day, the Soviet idyll that is destroyed by the approaching German troops, she veers away from the master narrative by mentioning fear and apprehension. In Soviet texts the memory of the outbreak of war was usually combined with elated enthusiasm and an eagerness to defend the “*Rodina*,” the Motherland. This pattern had been established in numerous books and films for children and is captured in the accounts of former Soviet citizens whom Svetlana Aleksievich interviewed for her book *The Last Witnesses* (*Poslednie svideteli*) about children’s wartime experiences in the Soviet Union. Here one can read:

“War!” All the children [shout]: “Hurrah!!” They are happy. Now we can prove ourselves, we can help our fighters. We’ll be heroes.... War seemed to us as the most interesting thing in life. The greatest adventure.<sup>34</sup>

33 Rol’nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat’*, p. 13. The 2002 version of the text adds the date — June 22, 1941 — but remains unchanged otherwise.

34 Svetlana Aleksievich, *Poslednie svideteli* (Moscow: Vremia, 2008), pp. 30–31.



This does not mean that the persons Aleksievich interviewed did not remember the brutal, deadly side of war, but their perception of World War II was tinged by the official discourse. The reaction that is quoted here is quite typical and uses a template that had been created, for example, in Arkadii Gaidar's popular children's book *Timur and his Squad* (*Timur i ego komanda*), in which the war provides the backdrop for numerous adventures by the pioneer heroes.

Remnants of this narrative can be found in Rol'nikaite, too. In the opening passages of her book, she establishes herself as a good Soviet citizen and pioneer: "*Ia pionerka*" ("I am a member of the Pioneers" [the Communist organization for children]),<sup>35</sup> and describes her refusal to get rid of her red pioneer scarf, which might single her out as a Communist. At least during the first days of the war, her family is more afraid of being persecuted for being party members and Communists than for being Jewish. The pioneer scarf is used here as a symbol of political correctness, as are other staples of Soviet ritual, like secret May Day festivities<sup>36</sup> or singing Soviet hymns and songs. This was a device to introduce Soviet emblems into a context that was more or less devoid of them — the ghetto or camp.

A way for Rol'nikaite to mark the difference between her testimony about the Holocaust and the accepted war narrative is highlighted by her attitude toward heroism and resistance. The question of Jewish resistance was especially charged ideologically; even with regard to children and teenagers, the war had to be re-told as a series of heroic deeds and of self-sacrifice. As Catriona Kelly has pointed out: "During most of the war and after it, the heroes whom children were invited to admire were those who were caught up in the conflict."<sup>37</sup>

Rol'nikaite did not want to present her story in the style of canonized girl heroes such as Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia or

35 Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*, p. 19.

36 Ibid., p. 147.

37 Catriona Kelly, *Children's World. Growing up in Russia 1890–1991* (New Haven-London: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 120.



Zina Portnova. She reflects on the difficulties of using heroic narratives in the context of the Holocaust in two scenarios that she plays out in her post-Soviet memoir. The first one is related to an encounter with a friend of the family, a Red Army soldier. She meets with him shortly after the war, eager to tell him about her family — who survived, who died, and of her own difficult but happy survival. She concludes her story with a remark about how lucky he was not to have been imprisoned in a German concentration camp. His reaction is almost aggressive and uncomprehending. He tells her that he cannot understand why the Jews in the ghettos and camps did not fight back and did not offer resistance, why they walked “like animals to slaughter!” (“*kak skot na boiniu!*”)<sup>38</sup> to the killing sites of Ponary. Her first reaction is speechlessness and hurt. Then she tries to talk about the difficulties of fighting back in the ghetto, the fact that even the Red Army retreated, and that most Soviet citizens did not fight back either. However, she was met with total disinterest.<sup>39</sup> The Holocaust cannot be told as a heroic story, even if there were some examples of Jewish resistance. His reaction to her story is symptomatic of that of the general Soviet public: “But he didn’t want to hear. He got up and left.”<sup>40</sup>

But even if she accommodates the Soviet fixation on heroism, this poses problems, too. It has to be the right kind of heroism. On the one hand, Rol’nikaite is supposed to mention the heroism of the Communist partisans, but on the other hand, she is supposed to downplay the role of Jewish resistance. In her post-Soviet memoir she addresses this issue by relating an argument she had with her editor. He advised her to remove an episode that describes how the Jewish resistance fighter Vittenberg turned himself in, in order to prevent retaliatory killings in the ghetto.

38 Rol’nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, p. 304. See also Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznajder, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter*, p. 105. This remark somewhat resonates with the slogan used by the FPO (Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye), the Jewish resistance movement in the ghetto, in demanding that the Jews not go like sheep to the slaughterhouse.

39 Ibid., p. 304.

40 Ibid.



In *I Have to Tell* she had written: "Today he saved me. Not only me [but also] Mamma, the children, thousands of mothers and children."<sup>41</sup>

In the eyes of her editor, this assessment was not correct, and he refers her to other Soviet heroes, like Aleksandr Matrosov and Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia, in comparison with whose heroic deeds Vittenberg's pales.<sup>42</sup> He criticizes the lack of "real fights, Communists, and organizers of the anti-fascist struggle in the ghetto"<sup>43</sup> in her text and recommends that she mention party members like Borovskaia and Shershenevsky and their activities.

Interestingly, ever so often when she relates episodes of heroic resistance by members of the Communist party, she tells them from hearsay. This may be due to Rol'nikaite trying to adhere to historical veracity, because she had not witnessed these events herself, or due to the fact that she later integrated these stories, which were part of the Soviet war narrative, into her own text. One of the passages in which she relates anecdotes and stories about these Communist fighters in the 1965 edition are also among the only instances for which there are footnotes with additional historical information.<sup>44</sup> The editor also refers her to two texts that could serve as aesthetic models for "Sovietizing" her text in the right way; namely, Shmuel Halkin's Yiddish poem "*Getograd*," known in Russian translation as "*Vosstanie v getto*" ("Revolt in the Ghetto") and Balys Sruoga's *Forest of the Gods* (*Les bogov*).<sup>45</sup> In her memoir she refutes the comparison with

41 Ibid., p. 544.

42 Ibid., p. 534.

43 Ibid., p. 526.

44 Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*, p. 92. In her memoir she comments upon this, saying that footnotes were her way of indicating that she did not know these names and could not have known them at the time. She also distances herself from the way the Soviet editor bends the truth by her remark that the actions of the partisans would not have conformed to the laws of conspiracy if a thirteen-year-old girl would have known who the partisans were and what they were up to. See Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, p. 536.

45 Halkin's (Galkin's) text about the Warsaw ghetto uprising had been published in Russian from the original Yiddish in 1958: Samuil Galkin, *Stikhi, ballady, dramy*



Sruoga. He was put into prison together with other Lithuanian intellectuals in order to intimidate the Lithuanian intelligentsia but not, as Rol'nikaite notes, in order to kill them. This is her way of pointing out the fundamental difference between victims of the Holocaust and other Soviet victims.<sup>46</sup>

Another important issue for the reviewer as well as the editor of the manuscript is the terms used for the German perpetrators. The reviewer writes: "Today we do not say 'the Germans killed,' 'the Germans tortured,' etc. One has to write 'the Hitlerites,' 'the German fascists,' 'the fascists,' etc. That would be more accurate."<sup>47</sup>

First she refuses to use these terms, but, after talking this through with a friend, she relents and rewrites her text. She replaces the word German with "occupier," "fascist," "murderer," "Hitlerite," etc. When it comes to Lithuanian or White Russian collaborators, they are now called "bandits." In her eyes these re-writings were a small sacrifice that was called for in order for her to be able to give her testimony altogether. Here, as elsewhere, it is evident that Rol'nikaite's manuscript in its first version did not comply with the postwar semantics concerning the depiction of Germans that was supposed to discern between good Germans (Communists) and bad Germans (Fascists). In its depiction of German crimes and atrocities, her text tends to be written along the lines that were established during the war, which underscored sadism and cruelty — like making the inmates of the camps jump for hours on end, humiliating them, killing newborn babies with

(Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1958); and Sruoga's autobiographical novel was published in the same year in Vilnius: Balys Sruoga, *Les bogov* (Vilnius: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury Litovskoi SSR, 1958).

46 Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, p. 528. Here, too, she deviates from Soviet political correctness, since there was no differentiation between different groups of victims in the all-inclusive term of "peaceful Soviet citizens" that was usually used to denote civilian victims.

47 Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, p. 526. What holds true for the designation of Germans holds true for the Russians as well. Rol'nikaite is advised to call them "sovetskie" and not "russkie." Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, p. 528.



bayonets, and other horrific ways of killing people.<sup>48</sup> Rol'nikaite indicates the atrocities, but, in general, the idea of revenge is subdued in her text.

Her revised text meets the demands of the Soviet war narrative in other aspects, too; for example, in her depictions of the Judenrat. As she writes in the 1990s, she was advised to point out the fact that the members of the Judenrat in the Vilna ghetto were somewhat willing executioners of the Nazis' orders. The Soviet interpretation of the nature of the members of this committee, the Jewish leadership in the ghetto, leaves no room for any moral dilemma or the tragic circumstances that framed many of their actions. The editor advises her to point out the bourgeois descent of the members of the Judenrat and highlight their wealth and to play down the fact that they were often chosen for this duty because they were dignitaries of the Jewish community. Rol'nikaite's attitude toward them was more discerning, and she mentioned the ways in which the Judenrat tried to ease the fate of the ghetto inhabitants, even though they also found ways for personal enrichment.<sup>49</sup>

All in all Rol'nikaite's recounting of her survivor experience coexists somewhat uneasily with the Soviet-inspired elements. The published version is full of ideologically acceptable expressions and sentences that glorify the Red Army while still trying to remain "neutral" and be true to the facts.<sup>50</sup> Unsurprisingly, to

48 Examples of these are films like *Rainbow* (*Raduga*, 1943), *She Fought for the Homeland* (*Ona srazhals' za rodinu*, 1943), or *Zoya* (*Zoia*, 1944). All three feature heroines and how they exacted revenge on the Germans and show German war crimes in quite graphic ways in order to mobilize the Soviet population in its fight against the German troops. By the end of the war, in view of new Cold War alliances, the discourse of hate toward the Germans no longer seemed appropriate and therefore was played down.

49 This was an important point in the Soviet understanding of the Holocaust, because it allowed combining mass murder with class issues; it is spelled out in the review of Rol'nikaite's book by the critic Iurii Poletika. He underscores the insights in Masha's account of ghetto life and applauds her depiction of the Judenrat, writing that its members were a group of degenerate capitalists willing to collaborate with the Fascists; see Iurii Poletika, "Nikogda," *Novyi Mir*, 8 (1965), pp. 249–250.

50 Sigrid Weigel points out the demands that were made on witness accounts in



give a last example, her book ends like many survivor memoirs with the liberation from the camp, but it also contains a strong Soviet symbol. The last sentence of her text reads: "But on his cap there shone a red star. I had not seen one for so long!..."<sup>51</sup>

The difficult if necessary reconciliation of true testimony alongside Soviet discourse is problematic to say the least, and it leaves us with a hybrid text. Testimonials are supposed to be neutral and unemotional, while Soviet texts had to serve certain ideas and were valued for their Socialist fervor and "*ideinost*" (ideological content). Rol'nikaite indicates that any "*ideinost*" in her text is due to the "contributions" of the professional editors and writers who reviewed her manuscript, and she points out that it was the editor who singlehandedly put markers of "*ideinost*" in her text.<sup>52</sup> It is interesting though that Rol'nikaite does not return the original wording to her text when she had the opportunity to do so after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the latest edition we still read "fascist" where once she wrote German.

## The Significance of Holocaust Memoirs and the Consequences of Their Absence in Russian Memorial Culture

As has been shown, Rol'nikaite's memoir *I Have to Tell* is a hybrid text. It poses vexing questions with regard to textual transmission and challenges some of the common notions of witness literature, notwithstanding Rol'nikaite's great credibility and moral authority. In conclusion, therefore, we must ask what the complicated history of the text as well as the precarious position of its author in Soviet literature tell us about the role

historical and legal terms; see Sigrid Weigel, "Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft, Klage und Anklage. Die Geste des Bezeugens in der Differenz von identity politics, juristischem und historiographischem Diskurs," in *Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft. Jahrbuch des Einstein Forums 1999* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2000), pp. 111–135.

51 Rol'nikaite, *Ia dolzhna rasskazat'*, p. 196.

52 Rol'nikaite, *I vse eto pravda*, p. 541.



of the Holocaust in Russian literature today. This is important because witness literature is a key element in the memorial culture of the Holocaust and serves in many ways as its foundation.

Testimonials and survivor memoirs are written with different intentions and in different discursive contexts. Some simply want to record names, dates, and events; some want to make sure that those who were killed are not forgotten; some want to provide material for prosecution; and some want to come to terms with traumatic experiences. Authors use their own names as tokens of factuality in order to form a pact between the autobiographical and the documentary. The intentions of the writers are mirrored in the intentions of the readers, whose task it is to read these narratives as documents and provide a contextual frame for them.<sup>53</sup> Both sides have to interact in order to make the collective memory work. Nancy K. Miller has pointed this out in the context of other types of memoirs; namely, those by literary critics. She writes:

If there are no documents and memoirs/autobiographies there are no possibilities for “allo-identification,” that is “to read yourself across the body or under the skin of other selves, people who are nothing — seem nothing — like yourself....”<sup>54</sup>

And she continues: “...however solitary, memoir reading, like memoir writing, participates in an important form of collective memorialization, providing building blocks to a more fully shared national narrative.”<sup>55</sup>

It stands to reason that a society that suppresses autobiographical and documentary renderings about the Holocaust does not allow its citizens to identify with Holocaust victims and survivors. Soviet readers thus had no way to “allo-identify” with Jews and with Holocaust victims. Russian culture is thus also deprived of

53 Nancy K. Miller, “But enough of me, what do you think of my memoir?” in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13: 2 (2000), p. 424.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 430.

55 *Ibid.*



the “therapeutic function” that the Polish literary critic Adam Michnik ascribes to documentary literature and films, as well as memoirs on the Holocaust in Polish culture.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, one could argue that a lack of witness accounts further results in less literary accounts and a less differentiated literary discourse. This might account for the relative absence of a Russian literature of “postmemory,” as Marian Hirsch has described it as well.<sup>57</sup> It seems that the Holocaust still does not provide Russian society with a “usable past” — or, to put it differently, that the “usable” version of the Holocaust is provided solely by fictionalized renderings that better fit the aesthetic framework of Russian literature and the social values of Russian society. Thus, the curriculum for school lessons on the Holocaust that members of the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center in Moscow propose features only novels — Rybakov’s and Grossman’s — but not documentary or memoir writing.<sup>58</sup>

I therefore do not agree with Aleksandr Etkind when he states that Soviet post-catastrophic memory can rely only on two processes — the defamiliarization of the Soviet past as such, and the return of repressed aspects of Soviet history, such as the

56 Michnik’s text is cited in Frank Grüner, Urs Heftrich, and Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, “Vorwort,” in Frank Grüner and Urs Heftrich and Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, eds., *“Zerstörer des Schweigens”: Formen künstlerischer Erinnerung an die nationalsozialistische Rassen- und Vernichtungspolitik in Osteuropa* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006), p. xv.

57 For the term postmemory, see Marianne Hirsch’s seminal article, “The Generation of Postmemory,” in *Poetics Today*, 29:1 (2008), pp. 103–128. One outside indication of this fact is found in the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature*, edited by Lillian Kremer. There is mention there of only one Russian text — Grossman’s *Life and Fate*; see S. Lillian Kremer, ed., *Holocaust literature: an encyclopedia of writers and their work* (New York: Routledge, 2003). This is significant, even though one cannot ignore the fact that the choice of authors to be included in this encyclopedia was heavily influenced by the modern American idea of Holocaust literature and by the availability of texts in English. For a critique, see David Roskies, “What is Holocaust Literature?,” in Eli Lederhendler, ed., *Jews, Catholics, and the Burden of History* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 157–212.

58 Ilia Al’tman, Alla Gerber, Dmitrii Prokudin, *Kholokost v russkoi literature. Sbornik urokov i metodicheskikh rekomendatsii* (Moscow: Tsentr i Fond “Kholokost,” Izdatel’sтво MIK, 2006).



Gulag or the repression of the 1930s.<sup>59</sup> This may hold true for Gulag memoirs and diaries, as well as depictions of the Stalinist terror, but not for documentary texts on the Holocaust. In my opinion witness accounts cannot resurface out of thin air; they need a context. Russian literature cannot compensate for this void, because the archives contain very few such texts; moreover, there is not much to be “defamiliarized” when it comes to the Holocaust.

The Russian search for a “usable past” with regard to the Holocaust turns out to be quite complicated, since Russian literature has very sparse material that it can re-work, retell, and transform. In addition, the case of Russian literature shows that documentary texts can be stored and archived without necessarily becoming part of the cultural memory. With regard to Jewish memories of the Holocaust, there was no “transmission” of life stories and experiences. There were only rare cases in which individual ordeals were transferred into the collective memory. The fate of Rol’nikaite’s memoir demonstrates this.

However, memories and stories have to be told and re-told and put into new words over and over again, not only for the sake of the witness but for the sake of society, too. This chain of remembrance was destroyed in the Soviet Union in 1947, with the suppression of Ehrenburg’s and Grossman’s *The Black Book*, and it has been restored only occasionally and in some places in the 1960s and in the *perestroika* era. The uneasy passage of Rol’nikaite’s memoir *I Have to Tell* into Soviet literature and beyond is in itself testimony to this fact.

59 Alexander Etkind, “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” *Slavic Review*, 68: 3 (2009), pp. 631–658.



